

# Historical sociolinguistics: How and why?

## *Some observations from Greek documentary papyri*

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### 1. Introduction

The study of language has undergone a profound paradigm shift in the second part of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Earlier approaches, of which Noam Chomsky's *Generative Grammar* is perhaps the most well-known representative,<sup>2</sup> focused on what Michael Halliday (2007[1974]) calls *language as knowledge*: that is, they took an 'intra-organism' perspective and tried to find out what goes on in the brain. At the end of the 1960s, however, a fundamental change in perspective occurred: scholars such as William Labov<sup>3</sup> started asking questions related to *language as behaviour*, taking an 'inter-organism' perspective and investigating how the individual behaves and interacts with his environment. This shift in perspective led to the establishment of sociolinguistics as a discipline, a discipline which has acquired a central role in modern-day linguistics.

Initially, written documents from the past were given little attention by sociolinguists, perhaps because Labov himself showed a negative attitude to historical linguistics, a discipline which he famously characterised as 'the art of making the best use of bad data'.<sup>4</sup> Later scholars such as Romaine, however, criticised the then predominant view of sociolinguistics, observing that 'a sociolinguistic theory which cannot handle written language is very restricted in scope and application, and cannot claim to be a theory of "language"'.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, historical sociolinguistics too, has come to maturity as a sub-discipline with its own journals, conferences, handbooks, summer schools, etc., its main goal being 'applying the tenets of contemporary sociolinguistic research to the interpretation of material from the past'.<sup>6</sup>

Historical sociolinguistic methods have started to penetrate the field of Classics and Byzantine Studies, too. Diachronic linguists, for example, no longer attempt to 'recon-

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. CHOMSKY (1957).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. LABOV (1966).

<sup>4</sup> LABOV (1994:11).

<sup>5</sup> ROMAINÉ (1982:122).

<sup>6</sup> CONDE-SILVESTRE & HERNÁNDEZ-CAMPOY (2012:1).

struct' the spoken language on the basis of lower-register texts; rather, they compare evidence from all sorts of texts, approaching Ancient Greek as a 'corpus language'.<sup>7</sup> Synchronically, several publications have shown the added value of a sociolinguistic perspective: for example, in a groundbreaking publication Lee (1985) pointed out that in the New Testament there is a tendency for linguistic features having a 'formal, dignified tone' (such as the adverb εὖ, the optative, the connective particle οὕτως, the vocative particle ὦ, οὐ μή with the subjunctive or future, the verb ὁράω, etc.) to be situated specifically in the words of Jesus, as a sign of importance.

A notion which holds a centre-stage position in (historical) sociolinguistics is that of 'context', as noted by Hasan (2001):

'Today, except perhaps for a die-hard minority, the notion of context has captured a centre-stage position so that concern with context – or more accurately, the perspective adopted on context – defines one's location within the now much more enriched discipline of linguistics.' (Hasan 2001:2)

Regrettably, however, there is no generally accepted theory of how context can be captured and related to language, perhaps because of its seemingly boundless nature. Cook (1990), for example, refers to context analysis as 'an exercise in capturing infinity'. In the past few decades, several important proposals have been formulated – including *Accommodation Theory*, *Politeness Theory*, and *Audience Design* – but these theories typically focus on specific aspects of context and are less concerned with the workings of language.<sup>8</sup>

One framework that is firmly grounded in linguistic theory, and aims to provide a coherent and unifying account, is the so-called *Functional Sociolinguistic* (or alternatively *Systemic Functional*) framework, which, in the most general terms, is 'concerned with explaining language in relation to how it is used'.<sup>9</sup> Within this framework, it has been proposed that three main contextual variables need to be taken into account, which have been explicitly connected to the functional resources of language.<sup>10</sup> These variables are called FIELD (which concerns what the discourse is about, for example 'science'), TENOR (which concerns the interactants and their relationship, for example 'close friends'), and MODE (which concerns the ways in which interactants come into contact,

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. BENTEIN (2013).

<sup>8</sup> See further BENTEIN (2017a).

<sup>9</sup> MARTIN & WILLIAMS (2004:120). For an in-depth presentation of the framework, see e.g. HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN (2014).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. HASAN (1995; 1999).

for example ‘written communication’). For each of these parameters, subparameters have been proposed: for example, for TENOR a subdivision in SOCIAL STATUS, AGENTIVE ROLE, and SOCIAL DISTANCE has been proposed.<sup>11</sup>

In §2, I will briefly illustrate the potential of the Functional Sociolinguistic framework for the historical sociolinguistic analysis of Ancient Greek, focusing on the functional area of complementation. My findings are based on documentary texts (letters and petitions) dating from the first until the eighth century AD, a corpus which has considerable advantages for historical sociolinguistic studies: these texts have been preserved in great number for almost a millennium, often can be dated and are not corrupted by transmission through scribes. Perhaps most importantly for our present purposes, they are also contextually diverse: for example, in order to measure the relevance and importance of the tenor subparameter of SOCIAL DISTANCE,<sup>12</sup> as I will do in §2, we can compare private and business letters on the one hand with official letters and petitions on the other.

## **2. Complementation in documentary writing (I – VIII AD)**

Complementation is an area which underwent considerable change in Post-classical and Byzantine Greek. Classical Greek is renowned for the complexity of its complementation system, involving the interplay of the indicative, optative, subjunctive, infinitive and participle, which were used according to semantic/pragmatic parameters such as ‘factivity’ and ‘event integration’.<sup>13</sup> In Post-classical and Byzantine Greek, this system was thoroughly disturbed, due to the progressive disappearance of the optative, participle, and infinitive,<sup>14</sup> and perhaps also due to language contact with Coptic and Latin, languages which prefer finite complementation patterns. As a result, social context came to play an ever more important role when it came to the choice of a complementation pattern.

The three complementation patterns which can be found most frequently in documentary texts are the accusative and infinitive, the accusative and participle, and ὅτι

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<sup>11</sup> For the operationalisation of these parameters and subparameters, see BENTEIN (2015a; 2017b).

<sup>12</sup> Social distance is understood here in terms of formality. As I note in BENTEIN (2017b:22), there is not a one-to-one correspondence between social distance and formality: the former is a property of interactants, whereas the latter is a property of texts. However, there is a quite clear connection between the two: one could say that maximal social distance corresponds to high formality, and minimal social distance to low formality.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. CRISTOFARO (1996).

<sup>14</sup> On the infinitive, see further BENTEIN (2018).

with the indicative.<sup>15</sup> When we look at the distribution of these complementation patterns in terms of formality, a quite noticeable distinction becomes apparent. Consider the following Table:<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1: Complementation patterns and formality (I – VIII AD)**

	Documents	Lines	ὅτι + ind.	ACI	ACI (form.)	ACI (non-form.)	ACP
<b>Formal</b>	783	15000	5.20	38.07	15.80	22.27	4.13
<b>Informal</b>	819	13608	23.59	54.09	39.17	14.92	1.54

(Instances per 1000 lines)

(Key: ACI = ‘accusative and infinitive’; form. = ‘formulaic’; non-form. = ‘non-formulaic’; ACP = ‘accusative and participle’)

As this table shows, ὅτι with the indicative is significantly more often used in informal texts than it is used in formal ones, with 23.59 (informal) versus 5.20 (formal) instances per 1000 lines of text. The accusative and infinitive is also mostly used in informal texts, but when we distinguish between formulaic and non-formulaic examples, we see that infinitival complementation is preferred in formal texts, with 22.27 (formal) versus 14.92 (informal) instances per 1000 lines. The accusative and participle, too, is preferred in such texts, with 4.13 (formal) versus 1.54 (informal) instances per 1000 lines.

Interestingly, ὅτι with the indicative on the one hand, and the accusative and infinitive and the accusative and participle on the other, will be used in these preferred social contexts even when this goes against the Classical norm. Consider the following three examples:

- (1) ἐλπίζω εἰς τὸν θεὸν **ὅτι πέμπω** σοι αὐτὰ ἢ μετ’ ἐμοῦ φέρω ἐρχόμενος (P.Oxy.16.1940, l. 3 (VI – VII AD))<sup>17</sup>

“I hope that I will send them to you or that I will bring them with me when I come.”

- (2) ἄπερ παραγενάμενος ἐνθάδε πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν τῆς συνκομιδῆς ἔμαθον **ταῦτα** ὑπὸ αὐτοῦ **πεπραῆχθαι** (P.Mich.6.423, ll. 10-11 (197 AD))

“When I came there at the time of the harvest, I learned that he had committed these transgressions.” [tr. YOutie & Pearl]

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see BENTEIN (2017b).

<sup>16</sup> I borrow these data from BENTEIN (2017b:21).

<sup>17</sup> Complementation patterns are indicated in bold for the sake of clarity. Translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

- (3) ὃν δὲ προφέρον[τ]αι [πά]ντες οἱ προγεγραμμένοι **τὸν Κρονίωνα ἀπενεγκάμενο(ν)** τῆς ἀδελφῆς Ταορσενούφεως κόσμον (P.Kron.52, ll. 14-16 (138 AD))

“All of the aforementioned people acknowledge that Cronion has taken the jewelry of his sister Taorsenouphis.”

In all of these examples, complementation patterns are extended beyond their Classical contexts of usage: in (1) ὅτι with the indicative, rather than the accusative and infinitive, is used after the verb psychological verb ἐλπίζω; the context is informal: P.Oxy.16.1940 represents a Byzantine business letter. In (2), the accusative and infinitive, rather than ὅτι with the indicative or the accusative and participle, is used after the verb of perception μανθάνω; the context is formal: P.Mich.6.423 represents a petition from a landowner named Gemellus to the *strategos*. In (3), the accusative and participle, rather than ὅτι with the indicative, is used after the verb of communication προφέρωμαι; the context is formal: P.Kron.52 represents a contract of divorce.

Next to these ‘major’ complementation patterns, one also encounters various ‘minor’ complementation patterns in documentary texts, that is, complementation patterns which occur much less frequently.<sup>18</sup> Some examples of such complementation patterns are ὥς and πῶς with the indicative, ἵνα and ὅπως with the subjunctive, and asyndetic parataxis. In illustration, consider the following examples:

- (4) ἔση γὰρ ἐπιστάμενος **ὥς**, εἰ ἀπομείνη τι ἐν λοιπάδει, **μέλλομεν** κελεύσει θεοῦ **ἀπαιτῆσαί** σε αὐτὸ ἐν διπλῇ (SB.3.7241, ll. 50-51 (710 AD))

“For you will know that if anything be in arrear we shall by God's command exact it from you in double measure.” [tr. Bell]

- (5) ἐχά[ρ]η\ν/ **π[ῶς]** **ἔπεμψάς** μ[ο]ν τὸν υἱὸν ἕως αὐτὸν προσκυνήσω (P.Mich.8.473, l. 4 (II AD))

“I was happy that you sent my son in order that I might greet him.” [tr. Youtie & Winter]

- (6) ἐρωτῶ σε οὖν, ἄδελφε, **ἵνα μάθης** τί πέπρακεν (P.Mich.8.475, ll. 10-11 (II AD))

“I therefore ask you, brother, to find out what he has sold.” [tr. Youtie & Winter]

- (7) [δ]εόμεθα καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν τὴν σὴν φιланθρωπίαν **ὅπως κελεύσης** αὐτῷ τῷ Χαιρήμονι ταῦτα ἡμῖν π[α]ρ[α]σχεῖν (P.Cair.Isid.64, ll. 15-17 (ca. 298 AD))

“We beg and beseech your Benevolence to order him, Chaeremon, to return this to us.”

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<sup>18</sup> For further discussion, see BENTEIN (2015).

(8) οἶδεν ὁ θεὸς **αἰσχύνομαι** εἴ σοι γράφω περὶ τούτου (CPR.30.17, l. 1 (ca. 643-644 AD))

“The Lord knows that I am ashamed if I write to you about this.”

In general, these minor complementation patterns show a marked tendency to occur either in formal or informal contexts.<sup>19</sup> ὥς with the indicative and ὅπως with the subjunctive, for example, are typical for formal contexts: (4) comes from an official letter of Kurrah ben Sharik to Basil the Pagarch, and (7) from a petition from two women, Aurelia ThaëSION and Aurelia Cyrillous, to the *strategos*. πῶς with the indicative, ἵνα with the subjunctive, and asyndetic parataxis on the other hand, typically occur in informal contexts: (5) comes from a private letter from Tabetheus to her brother Tiberianus, (6) from a private letter from Papirius Apollinarius to the same Tiberianus, and (8) from a private letter from Menas to Senuthius.

One could say that patterns that already existed in the Classical period tend to be used in formal contexts, and innovative patterns in informal contexts, but this is not always the case: the latter can also be found in higher social contexts.<sup>20</sup> One such example is the complementation pattern of ὥς with the participle, with the subject of the complement clause occurring in the accusative or genitive case. Although this constitutes a completely novel formation,<sup>21</sup> it predominantly occurs in formal contexts. An example can be found in (9):

(9) Εὐπορος τοίνυν υἱὸς Ἑρμεία ἀπὸ κώμης Φιλαγρείδος τοῦ αὐτοῦ νομοῦ ἐσύλησέν με ἔνδων τῆς οἰκείας, ἐπιβάς ληστρικῶ τρόπῳ, καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐσθητὰν συνελάβετο καὶ ἐ[ίς] τὸ ἴδιον ἀνεστιλάτω μέχρις δ[ευ]ρῶ, δυναμ[έν]ου μου καὶ τ[ὰς] ἀποδίξει[ς] [ποι]εῖν **ὥς τούτου τήνδε τὴν κ[α]κουργίαν π[ε]ποιημένου** (P.Abinn.55 (351 AD), ll. 6-12)

“Euporus, then, son of Hermias, of the village of Philagris in the same nome, robbed me in my house, entering it in the manner of a robber, and seized all my clothing, and appropriated it to his own use until now, although I can demonstrate that it was he who perpetrated this outrage.” [tr. Bell *et al.*]

This example comes from a markedly formal context: a petition from the deacon Aurelius Heron to the military commander Flavius Abinnaeus. Most of the other examples, too, confirm the use of the pattern in this higher social context: P.Wisc.1.31 (ll. 12-13, after 147 AD) is an official letter; P.Cair.Isid.65 (ll. 3-5, 298/299 AD) a petition;

<sup>19</sup> I should emphasise that we are dealing with a marked tendency, not an absolute rule.

<sup>20</sup> Compare BENTEIN (2013:26): ‘the high register too may be the starting point for innovations.’

<sup>21</sup> Compare CRISTOFARO (1996:83-85).

P.Abinn.3 (ll. 19-20, 346-351 AD) an official letter; P.Cair.Masp.2.67194 (ll. 2-3, VI AD) another official letter; etc.

### 3. Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn attention to the correlation that exists between the social parameter of SOCIAL DISTANCE (that is, formality/informality) and certain complementation patterns. Such correlations have not always been considered particularly important or relevant: in fact, most standard grammars completely ignore such observations. I would like to stress, however, that employing a historical sociolinguistic methodology has a number of crucial advantages. First, it allows us to give a much more in-depth account of language change: by contrasting the use of linguistic features in specific registers, we can give a more detailed account of the spread or decline of these features.<sup>22</sup> Second, it allows us to better understand the ‘message’ conveyed by ancient documents: next to elements such as writing style, document format, writing material, etc., language constitutes a key socio-semiotic resource, as has been shown in multimodal studies.<sup>23</sup> Third, this approach allow us to better understand ‘decontextualised’ texts, that is, texts of which little or no context is known. For example, if one were to find the pattern of ὡς with the participle in a certain document, it would be quite likely that we are dealing with a formal document. Of course, the correctness of such hypotheses depends on the amount of research that has been done. At this point, much more socio-historical research is needed on both documentary and literary texts. Further research should not just focus on one social (sub)parameter, as I have done here, but try to understand the complex interplay of all social parameters proposed by the *Functional Sociolinguistic* framework.

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<sup>22</sup> See further BENTEIN (2013).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN (1996).

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